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ABSTRACT

This report summarizes the data from the Study of Special Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), a national study of personnel in special education. It focuses on data related to recruiting and retaining high-quality special education teachers. Findings indicate: (1) in 1999-2000, more than 12,000 openings for special education teachers were left vacant or filled with substitutes; (2) approximately three-fourths of special education teachers were employed in the same state where they received their initial teacher preparation; (2) roughly 7% of special educators earned their certification through an alternative route, with teachers of students with emotional disturbance having the largest proportion (12%); (3) in 1999-2000, only 15% of local administrators offered financial incentives above and beyond the local salary schedule to recruit teachers, however, salary did not predict special education teachers' intent to stay; (4) the mean age of special education teachers nationwide was 43, and two-thirds were committed to remaining in teaching until retirement or as long as they were able; and (5) teachers were more likely to say they would stay in teaching when their workload was manageable, their school was supportive, and paperwork did not interfere significantly with teaching. (CR)

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ED 467 270

SPeNSE Summary Sheet

Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education

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Recruiting and Retaining High-Quality Teachers

Policymakers at the Federal, State, and local levels are concerned with improving educational results for students with disabilities. One way they can address this goal is by ensuring an adequate supply of high-quality teachers. This report summarizes data from SPeNSE, a national study of personnel in special education. It focuses on data related to recruiting and retaining high-quality special education teachers and enhancing the skills of those already employed.

What Are the Characteristics of the Teacher Workforce?

Characteristic	Special Education Teachers	Regular Education Teachers
Hold a Master's degree	60.0%	49.0%
Years of teaching experience	14.3	15.5
Have certification for main teaching assignment	92.0	95.1
Average age	43.0	43.0

How Do We Find High-Quality Teachers?

In 1999-2000, more than 12,000 openings for special education teachers were left vacant or filled by substitutes. According to special education administrators, the greatest barrier to finding teachers was a shortage of qualified applicants. Other major barriers included insufficient salary and benefits, openings becoming available too late, and the geographic location of the school. While the latter two barriers may be difficult to address through changes in policy, the two primary barriers, teacher shortages and salaries, are amenable to policy changes that increase the supply of new or returning teachers, reduce attrition, and improve recruitment processes to better match applicants with appropriate positions.

As policymakers seek to address teacher shortages, three questions often arise.

- Will reciprocity across States improve recruitment? There is considerable anecdotal evidence that teachers certified in one State are uncertified in another. To increase the pool of qualified teachers, some policymakers have called for greater reciprocity across States.
- To what extent can alternative certification programs increase the pool of available teachers? Some individuals maintain that such programs produce more high-quality teachers than do traditional teacher preparation programs.
- Does salary matter in recruiting and retaining teachers?

This section includes results from SPeNSE that inform each of these issues.

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Will reciprocity across States improve recruitment? Overall, reciprocity does not appear to be a significant problem among teachers already employed. Approximately three-fourths of special education teachers are employed in the same State where they received their initial teacher preparation. Of the 8 percent of special education teachers who were not certified for their main assignment, only 12 percent indicated that they were fully certified in another State. Furthermore, the percentage of teachers who were fully certified for their position did not differ for those prepared in-state and those prepared elsewhere, so movement across state lines did not adversely affect the certification status of teachers already employed. Nonetheless, these results must be interpreted with caution. No information is available on the number of teachers certified in one State who failed to find employment in a second state or the number of teachers required to take additional coursework after they were hired to meet certification requirements in the receiving state.

Can alternative routes to certification substantially increase the supply of teachers? Some policymakers and advocates have proposed expanding alternative certification programs as a way to increase the supply of good teachers. Roughly 7 percent of current special education teachers earned their certification through an alternative route. Teachers of students with emotional disturbance have the largest proportion of teachers who used alternative routes to certification, 12 percent. This is especially noteworthy because administrators often have difficulty recruiting teachers to serve students with emotional disturbance. Only 4.5 percent of general education teachers earned their certification through alternative routes. Individuals completing alternative certification programs, at present, do not account for a large proportion of the teaching force. However, of individuals who have been teaching fewer than 5 years, 10 percent received certification through an alternative route, suggesting that the number of teachers earning their certification through these programs is increasing. Currently, there is little information on the quality of these alternative certification programs or the programmatic features that account for the differential success of their graduates. However, on many variables related to teacher quality, special education teachers who earned their certification through alternative routes did not differ from those who earned their certification through more traditional programs. These alternative programs may assume an increasingly important role in the future and may prove to be a particularly important source for hard-to-find teachers.

"...of individuals who have been teaching fewer than 5 years, 10 percent received certification through an alternative route, suggesting that the number of teachers earning their certification through these programs is increasing."

Is increasing salaries an effective strategy? In 2000-2001, the typical special education teacher with a Master's degree and 13 years of teaching experience earned $38,774. However, some beginning teachers with a Bachelor's degree earned less than $15,000. Increasing salaries may attract people into the profession and discourage attrition among those already teaching. In 1999-2000, only 15 percent of local administrators offered financial incentives above and beyond the local salary schedule to recruit teachers. How successful are financial approaches to recruitment and retention? Previous research shows that teachers in schools with higher salaries are significantly less likely to leave (Ingersoll, 2001), but, in SPeNSE, salary did not predict special education teachers' intent to stay or a district's overall teacher quality.

Can specialized recruitment strategies help? Improved recruitment practices will not increase the overall supply of teachers, but they may help match prospective applicants with jobs for which they are qualified. To recruit qualified teachers in times of shortage or for hard-to-fill positions, schools and districts may need to move beyond traditional recruitment methods and consider approaches like job fairs, external recruiters, and web sites. For example, the Electronic Employment Bulletin Board, which was developed by the Mountain Plains Regional Resource Center and the State of Kansas, permits local administrators to list job openings (both special education and general education) and allows applicants to apply for positions via the web. Some school districts provide virtual tours of their districts for applicants to view prior to submitting their resumes electronically. The system has been extended to other States, and those using it have reported success in recruiting teachers.

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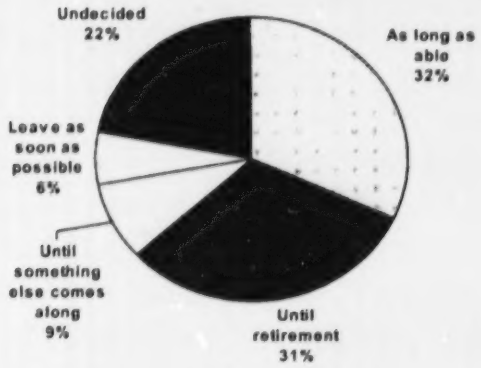
How Can We Retain Teachers Already Employed

In 1999-2000, the mean age of special education teachers nationwide was 43. Many of these teachers will be eligible for retirement within the next 15 years. Data from SPeNSE and previous research suggest that teaching experience is strongly associated with special education teacher quality. As such, State and local education agencies should be particularly concerned about attrition among experienced teachers. The extent to which experienced teachers can be retained through financial incentives, part-time employment, or other means, may significantly improve the quality of the teacher workforce.



Two-thirds of today's special education teachers are committed to remaining in teaching until they retire (31 percent) or as long as they are able (32 percent); however, 6 percent want to leave the profession as soon as possible. Of those who plan to leave,

- 17 percent said their workload was not at all manageable;
- 13 percent were not fully certified for their position;
- 76 percent said paperwork interferes with their job of teaching to a great extent; and
- 42 percent serve students with four or more primary disabilities.

One in five teachers are undecided as to how long they will stay in special education. This group will have an important impact on future shortages of special education teachers. Schools and school districts will need to find ways to retain these teachers, given the difficulties many districts experience in hiring new special education teachers.

Perhaps surprisingly, a wide range of local policies did not influence teachers' career plans. These included a district policy of developing an individual professional development plan for each teacher, offering free training to teachers, using merit pay, and supporting teachers who were not performing satisfactorily. Moreover, factors that were often presumed to burden teachers did not necessarily affect their likelihood of remaining on the job; these were the number of schools the teacher works in or the need for multiple certifications for one's job.

When a number of factors were examined simultaneously, teachers were more likely to say they would teach as long as they were able or until retirement when their workload was manageable, their school was supportive of staff and students, and paperwork did not interfere significantly with their teaching.

Upgrading Teachers' Skills

Improving educational results for students with disabilities requires not only an adequate supply of special education teachers but also a pool of teachers who are highly skilled and knowledgeable. Preservice preparation and continuing professional development are designed to help teachers acquire the knowledge and skills they need. In assessing their own skills, special education teachers rated themselves highly in many areas, including planning lessons and using appropriate instructional techniques. Special education teachers rated their skills lowest on using technology in education, accommodating diverse students' learning needs, interpreting the results of standardized tests, and using literature to address problems. Accommodating diverse students' needs and using literature to address problems received little attention in the inservice training teachers had received in the past 3 years and in their preservice training. While many teachers had more than 8 hours of inservice training in using technology, and about two-thirds had preser-

vice training in this area, they still lack confidence in their ability to use technology in instruction. Interpreting the results of standardized tests had been included in the preservice training of two-thirds of the teachers, but it was not given significant attention in inservice training. Given the emphasis on assessment in the Leave No Child Behind Act of 2002, teachers must be comfortable with and skilled in this important task.

Both the scope and quality of professional development experiences were associated with teacher quality in SPeNSE. Teachers who perceived district-supported professional development as relevant and of high quality scored higher in a broad-based measure of teacher quality as did those whose recent in-service experiences covered a wide range of topics important in the field.

Working Toward The Future

To ensure a highly qualified supply of special education teachers in the future, policymakers should consider the following strategies:

1. Create programs to encourage experienced teachers to stay on beyond retirement, perhaps as part-time teachers or mentors;
2. Promote the use of less traditional methods of recruitment, such as the use of web sites or professional recruiters;
3. Examine State and local policies that affect paperwork burden to see if some requirements can be reduced, making the jobs of special education teachers more manageable;
4. Work with school districts and teachers preparation programs to provide more training in areas in which teachers feel their skills are weakest, that is, using technology in education, interpreting results of standardized tests, accommodating diverse students' learning needs, and using literature to address problems; and
5. Help school districts tailor continuing professional development to the needs of special education teachers and ensure that those programs use best practices, including time for teachers to implement what they have learned.

Please share these findings with your colleagues and use them as a starting point for discussions on the recruitment and retention of high-quality special education teachers.

The Study of Personnel Needs in Special Education (SPeNSE), funded by OSEP and conducted by Westat, included telephone interviews with a nationally representative sample of local administrators, special and general education teachers, speech-language pathologists, and paraprofessionals in spring and fall 2000. For more information and a complete list of references, go to www.spense.org.

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